

Customer service: an oxymoron?

by Robert M. Gignac

Much has been written regarding the shift to the service economy. Traditional manufacturing is out; 'service' is where it's at. Given that, why is 'customer service' such an elusive thing? Is it really that bad? Has customer service become an oxymoron? Let me offer three recent examples:

- Shopping for a gift at a large Canadian retailer, I stood in line for about three minutes waiting my turn. When I finally got to the head of the line I remarked to the harried clerk, "looks like you could use a little help back there," to which he replied, "actually what would help right now, would be fewer customers." With their sales down 50 per cent, he's getting his wish. Soon they'll be fewer clerks, too.
- At a bulk food store, a gentleman in front of me was purchasing three bars of glycerine soap, priced at \$1.49 each. The clerk weighed the items instead, announcing that he owed \$1.78. The customer knowing this was the wrong amount suggested she check again (kudos to him, he could have left with a bargain!), the items were not sold by weight, but by the piece and were priced at \$1.49. To my astonishment she replied, "That's okay, \$1.78 is what I'm charging you, it's too much work to void it, besides, it's not my money." Interesting. Does she understand where her paycheque comes from?

- After enjoying an excellent meal with my wife, we were offered the dessert menu. A quick scan revealed they didn't have what we really wanted – a piece of apple pie. So we asked for one. "I don't know why people ask for that all the time, it's not on the menu," the waitress replied with a shrug. Here's a thought: we ask for it because we like it. I paid our bill and we thoroughly enjoyed our apple pie at a different establishment.

In all three instances of "non-service," I would suggest the same message be applied: don't shoot the clerk/cashier/waitress, it's not their fault. Customer service issues such as these, which have become all too common today for many consumers, start with the people in levels above them in any organization. The road from 'quality' to 'pathetic' customer service is not a very long road, nor is it a tough road to travel. However, it is filled with road-killed organizations who have forgotten that it is the customer who ultimately pays the bills.

I have always been amused by any retailer with a large sign near the back of the store reading "Customer Service." When I'm feeling particularly feisty, I like to go to the person at that counter and ask, "Excuse me, if this is the 'customer service' desk, what are the rest of the employees doing?" It never fails to elicit a blank stare. Customer service comes from every employee in an organization regardless of job title, department, salary, or gender. Or-

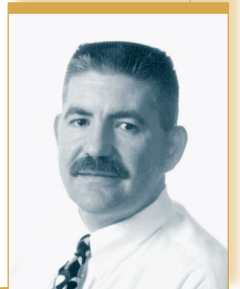
ganizations that provide quality customer service have eliminated the phrase "it's not my job."

Many organizations try to solve their customer service problems by dumping 'soft skills' on their front line employees – what I sometimes call 'smile' training. While it can act as a short-term fix, the key to delivering quality customer service lies in attitude – an attitude of service. It consists of all the smiling, listening, communication and interpersonal skills you want to throw at someone, but there is no substitute for attitude. With a positive customer service attitude, we view customers as opportunities for service not as problems or interruptions.

Recently I found a silver lining in the dark anti-service cloud, in the form of running shoes. I was in a local outlet of a nationwide chain specializing in running gear. The clerk, a runner herself, could actually talk about the products, and had the attitude to serve. She listened to me, I listened to her, and I was presented with four options. I was encouraged to try all of them on, walk around, and go for a quick jog outside the store. She watched how I 'run' (I use that term loosely...) and in the end recommended not the most stylish shoe, nor the most expensive shoe, but most importantly, the 'right' shoe for my needs.

After receiving such professional service, I couldn't resist asking one final question as I walked out the door, "do you own this store?" to which she replied with a large smile, "not yet." **SBCM**

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